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Who's Talking?

Every President in our memory has attempted, at some point, a crackdown on news leaks and public divergences from policy by maverick officials. The Reagan administration, for all the President's coolness and good humor, has reached that point. As always, this is a cosmetic treatment for a managerial problem that can only be dealt with effectively in more fundamental terms.

The control mechanisms that are being deployed from the White House are not only cosmetic, but embarrassing. We have, for example, Deputy Defense Secretary Carlucci volunteering to be the first to take a lie-detector test as part of an effort to find out who leaked a horrendous-looking \$750 billion horseback estimate of additional needed defense spending over the next seven years. If that leak caused any political problem, the lie-detector ploy compounded it.

Then we have White House Communications Director David Gergen setting out to "coordinate" the TV appearances and major policy statements of Cabinet officers and other henchos. Mr. Gergen may have been a good choice, since some of his own cocktail party chitchat critical of presidential policies recently ended up in a Baltimore newspaper. But throttling similar indiscretions elsewhere in government calls for a great deal more than a functionary with direct knowledge of the problem.

It calls for something Mr. Gergen is not in a position to deliver: clearer lines of communication and authority between the President and his senior officials. If those lines are functioning properly, it should be always evident where the administration stands on important policy issues. When that prerequisite is in place, it should then be made abundantly clear to lesser officials that they will risk embarrassment and possibly even more serious consequences if they go public with contrary notions.

Now it is of course fundamental that those lesser officials should have an opportunity to be heard when the decision is being formulated, and they should be convinced that their hearing is genuine. If they think they are being suppressed, or used, by someone on a

We in the newspaper business are willing and eager to provide the means for debate; and we are convinced that open debate is vital to the health of democracy. On the other hand, we recognize that a President has a point in believing that once he has made a decision, it is time for his underlings to end the debate and carry it out. How can a government, or any organization, function otherwise? And in our most candid moments, we would have to admit that the press does not always play fair with either its readers or the President when it allows itself to be used by undisclosed sources surreptitiously to try to torpedo existing policy.

The solution to the problem, though, is not to try to cut off contact with the press. The administration already has enough problems making itself clear without a wet blanket on its own spokesmen. The solution is for the administration to make its own policies and own procedures clear to itself. If every policy is constantly up for a committee decision, you are constantly inviting contending parties to fight it out through leaks to the press. And here the leading example has not been national security policy but tax policy, where a constant series of leaks has fueled speculation that the President is going to reverse himself.

Instead of looking for ways to manage contacts with unruly reporters, the President should be looking for ways to solve the management problem within the administration. He needs a few—very few—key people in charge who will insure that policy channels are kept open and that decisions are carried out. They should be clearly identified, through the means that are available to a President, as his policy spokesmen in three key areas, economic, social and foreign affairs.

The President is already moving that way, at least potentially, with the appointment of his old friend William Clark as National Security Adviser. But economic policy remains cluttered and social policy disordered. Management problems are inevitable in an organization built from scratch at the outset of a presidential term. But after nearly a year, the necessary shake-down should be further advanced than